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Open letter to Libby, Montana: Please help us

Editor:

The word "sick" and its inevitable ugly brother "twisted" came up yesterday [March 13, 2005] in a conversation between myself and one Libby resident. It is hard to imagine anything sicker and more twisted happening to a group of people than what has been imposed upon Libby by W.R. Grace & Co., with the help of and negligence supplied by government health and safety agencies as well as the entire political structure. I have a story to tell you. I'll make it short although it is much larger than what I say. Perhaps you will understand why I have been writing to Libby.

In 1997, I was part of a three-man team investigating tremolite exposures in El Dorado County, Calif. The results of our investigation were simply staggering inside and outside homes of residents, as all indications said they would be. I only want to tell you about one of those results.

In a home of one of my neighbors, I found a baby less than 6 months old in a crib with its attentive mother and two other children hovering nearby, always. The father was driving a tractor with a blade behind it, directly outside the open window of the baby. I looked outside to see the sun reflecting off the glaseous surface of the 100 percent long-fiber asbestiform tremolite veins that I knew were present. The dust poured in through the window to cover the baby's crib, blankets and every other surface inside the home. We were prepared to take settled dust samples by vacuum method, analyzed by a reputable laboratory with TEM. The results

were over 100 times higher than any settled dust measurement later taken in Libby homes. The others didn't realize what that meant at that time, but I sure did. The largest death tolls from mineral fibers on our planet are from environmental exposures. One should also note that these types of scenarios have been occurring in chrysotile asbestos areas of California for over 200 years with no human health effects. Less than 20 years in El Dorado County with tremolite and we already have deaths.

I also know that you in Libby know what that means too. Although I doubt that you have been told that children born into tremolite exposures are nine times more likely to contract fatal disease from that exposure than are tremolite-exposed adults. The world's most toxic natural occurring material (as measured by the actual known death toll) is administered by parents to their very own children!

I have waited eight years for anyone in public health to tell that mother and father what the people in Libby already know. It hasn't happened yet, and never will unless these stories are told. The only things these people have heard from an authority are nearly the identical things, word for word, that W.R. Grace told the people of Libby for 40 years, only this time it comes directly from government, which tells you where Grace heard it in the first place.

A few weeks ago I was invited to San Francisco to tell EPA what is happening in El Dorado County. It has taken them since 1996 to get involved. Here, as in Libby, they

only became involved because of public embarrassment, not because they are nice guys or heroes. I told them about the baby; about the Superior Court judge who edits court records and transcripts so people in El Dorado cannot find out about tremolite; about the county health officer who sits on his butt and does nothing, when he is not busy making up lies about it; about the environmental director who misleads everyone into thinking it is safe.

I told them about my family being forced into exposures at near gunpoint by police officers who wanted us to shut up about these exposures.

Finally, I asked EPA what they intend to do? They answered, "We are going to tell the truth, but we are only going to tell the truth as far as some public spaces go." Of course Libby knows by now that the truth is something very foreign and elusive to public health officials and most likely will never truly see the light of day completely. But do you want to know something really sick and twisted that even W.R. Grace may never have done? They are going to inform the public but conveniently leave out any possible information regarding these 10,000 homes. They are not going to tell this mother that her now 8-year-old child needs to be monitored for the remainder of her life, so that lifesaving measures can be taken if anything is found. Nor tell her how to stop exposures. You all know now how likely it is that something will happen to this child, and it can happen as young as 14 years old. Conveniently for government, they will not be telling the great number of

parents who have similarly situated children either. With the death rate well underway already in El Dorado County, ignored by EPA, this surpasses all the cruelty ever even vaguely imagined by companies like W.R. Grace by a very wide margin, made worse by government hiding under the cover of friendship.

I know you still have problems in Libby, problems related to future health care; problems related to clean up; problems that haven't even arisen yet. Squabbles and negotiations to get financial matters, compensations, health care and cleanup under control. But perhaps this story, which I have waited all these years to tell, begins to explain why I have been writing to Libby. I have sought your help because there is precious little of it here. I have always known that you would be the ones to know, the ones to know what to say and what to do. You are the power base on this subject. You have the ability to insure that the remainder of the United States gets this right and that no more liars or half-measures are acceptable. No more playing politics with people's lives. It ain't easy. It may not even be right that I ask you for help, given your suffering. Still, it is hard to imagine that you would stand by and allow it to continue anywhere else, allow it to go any farther than it already has.

I hope you are all up to flexing your muscles on this situation a bit more. You have far more of them than you may yet have realized.

Thanks for reading. God Bless.

Terry Trent, biologist
Auburn, Calif.